Indian Regional and Transnational Diaspora: A Study of their Ethnicity
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ABSTRACT

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This study endeavours to highlight the ethnic side of Indian migrants who not only move within but also outside the frontiers. Historically these people have created two different categories of diasporas-inland and overseas. What is significant here is that both of these diasporas exhibit ethnic persistence. Different Indian communities who migrate within India and overseas do not loose their cultural roots even after long period of living away from their localities of origin. Diverse communities of India which have been part of the internal migration process more particularly in the colonial and postcolonial period have maintained their traditional identities in the host society. Similarly in case of transnational migration Indian communities have retained their cultural identities in the face of assimilation from host societies.

KEYWORDS

Diaspora, assimilation, ethnographies, hybridity, segregation, hostland, subculture, nativism

Introduction

The phenomenon of voluntary and involuntary migration across the world has been witnessed from time immemorial. With the dawn of modernity there was a surge in migration waves both within and outside the Empires. During the modern phase of history first it was Colonialism, then rupture of Empires together with growth of industrial capitalism, that the process of movement of communities was hastened both within national boundaries and without. Myriad waves of migration have facilitated production of ethnographies of people on the move (Gidwani, 2004:342). Not only overseas migration but also inland migration got a boost from colonial rule. With cheap labour becoming the first major export from British India, migration across British Empire was accelerated (Gidwani, 2004) This was coterminous with inland migration within colonial India from one region to another prompted by colonial capitalism in India.

Literature Review

There are several accounts of migration of Indian communities within and outside India. Various migration streams have been analysed from different perspectives. Fillopo Osella and Katy Gardner in their work ‘Migration, Modernity and Social Transformation’ investigate various diasporic movements. They analyse the issue of migration in terms of the sociological consequences. Their study reveals the ambivalent nature of the outcome of the migration phenomenon in South Asia. Rajesh Gill in her work ‘Contemporary Indian Urban Society: Ethnicity, Gender and Governance’ examines the multidimensional issues concerning urbanizing societies both rural and urban. It gives stress on different facets of urban society and particularly the ethnic dimension of city’s inhabitants. Annapurna Shaw in her work ‘Indian Cities’ highlights the socioeconomic facets of Indian cities on the basis of interdisciplinary approach. She examines the issues of identity, migration, social milieu and class of Indian cities. Chinmay Tumbe in his book ‘India Moving A History of Migration’ presents a panoramic view of myriad
migration streams in the Indian subcontinent. He has examined the consequences of migration of different social-ethnic groups from different regions of the country and also the psychology behind their migration. M.S.A.Rao’s book on *Urban Sociology in India* deals with sociology of urban India. It throws light on the impact of migration upon urbanization and provides an analysis of the demographic and ecological aspects of the Indian cities. S.K.Gupta’s *Indian Diaspora: Study of Emerging Sandwich Cultures* is a significant work on the Indian Transnational diaspora highlighting the differential diasporic experience of immigrant Indians in three different corners of the world.

**Methodology**

This research article is based on the in-depth study of literature on Indian internal migration and overseas migration. The method involves a systematic analysis and comparison of works on both internal and external migrants in the modern period.

**Indian Regional Migrations**

Historically, transgression of boundaries have taken place both within and across national borders and consequent blurring of cultural boundaries and hardening of ethnic identities at the same time. Migrations depending on its nature have produced specific diasporas. They are related to specific ethnic communities, languages and regions. Diasporas have been created not only outside national boundaries but also within. For instance, there is an Indian diaspora and then there are subnational diasporas which emerge from interstate internal migration (Tumbe,2018). Within the Indian State internal migrations have created mosaic of linguistic communities and assorted cultures in the urban centres while overseas migration from India led to the formation of Indian diaspora on foreign soil.

These dispersal of communities and ethnic groups outside their region of origin have given birth to the issues of segregation, integration and assimilation. The process of migration within India and outside the Indian frontier is not a modern phenomenon but have continued since precolonial times. For instance, migration of Maratha families to the cities of Tamil region and Bikaneris from erstwhile Rajputana to Murshidabad in undivided Bengal have taken place before the emergence of colonialism in India. The migration of silk weaver community Pattunulkarar (Saurashtra) from Saurashtra in Gujrat to Madurai in Tamil Nadu can be traced back to migration in the 3rd or 4th centuries CE or in the medieval period(Tumbe,2018:24-25). Similarly, overseas migrations from India can be illustrated by the Romas or Gypsies found across Europe today who hailed from low ranking castes and indigenous tribes of north west India(Tumbe,2018:19). But migrations in the modern period characterised by the growth of westphalian state system, nationalism and transnationalism make them a more chequered phenomenon.

Migrations in the contemporary period have been marked by historical continuities and cultural change. In our deterritorialised world both subnational and transnational migrants signify not only modernity characterised by binaries but postmodern condition of hybridity and fragmented self. But it is a more complex phenomenon in which actual migrant communities straddle between hybridity and essentialism (Osella & Gardener,2004). Whatever may be the geographical context of migration whether it is internal migration within India, overseas migration from India and migration in other nation states, issue of identities of migrant communities and their perpetuation and transformation have spawned curiosity among researchers. A migrant is associated with multiple identities of ethnicity, nationality, race and citizenship. On the basis of these identities binaries of insider or outsider are recreated between the host society and migrant communities.

Among various identities ethnicity is the oldest which is inclined to retain its primordial and cultural inclination (Singha Roy,2018:159). It is an organising principle of describing a collectivity based on some inherited features such as common,history, language, territory(Singha Roy,2018:160). Urban industrialism has promoted migration of diverse collectivities to the cities and urban centres of India, also mines and plantations in its countryside.
Whether it is labour or mercantile migration the issue of identity and relations between the migrant and the host becomes pertinent. It is necessary to point out that immigrants all over the world strive to preserve their native social & cultural milieu, carving out distinct physical neighbourhoods in their new cities (Rao et al., 1990:6). The fact of ethnic solidarities undergoing continuous process of consolidation at one end and fragmentation on the other is true with respect to inland and overseas migration (Rao et al., 1990:181).

In India setting up of large industries in cities like Bombay, Calcutta or Chennai or rise of company townships like Bhilai, Rourkela, Asansol have engendered internal migration to these cities and towns. For instance, most of the workforce of Bhilai Steel Plant hail from provinces other than Chattisgarh which has led to Bhilai’s cosmopolitanism (Osella & Gardener, 2004:231-232). Strong solidarities have developed within BSP workgroups which almost invariably consists of both local and outsiders. After decades of coexistence at Bhilai, a more composite cosmopolitan culture has emerged amongst the migrant communities. In Bhilai a man’s identity as a chief steel maker is more encompassing. A Bhilai steelworker is a steelworker, whose primordial identity is eclipsed by Bhilai’s Cosmopolitianism (Osella & Gardener, 2004:245). The social heterogeneity of BSP workforce provides a rupture with their villages of origin. Bhilai’s company housing pattern follows a fixed bureaucratic procedures that negate ethnicity, caste and religion (Ibid., 232). But there is another aspect to Bhilai’s cosmopolitanism. Even after decades of coexistence, regional ethnicity and ethnic stereotyping among migrant worker’s group has thrived more in the private sphere than public sphere of the township (Ibid., p.231). Whether it is Bhilai, Rourkela, Durgapur which signify post colonial industrialism or vibrant state capitals of Bombay, Kolkata, Hyderabad or Chennai, migration of diverse ethnic groups to these cities has been a continuous process. It has been found that immigrant communities to the Indian cities settle themselves in ethnic pockets and try to preserve their traditional ties based on kinship, region of origin and language (Kumaran, 1992:12). Migrant groups coming from a particular region settle in a particular locality of the new city and try to simulate their traditional cultural environment through the activities of the ethnic associations (Kumaran, 1992:14). Immigration in the urban context tends to acquire an ethnic identity as immigrants tend to get segregated from the older residents. For instance in Pune, migration of Telegu speaking people was a precolonial phenomenon was associated with formation of associations based on kinship. The Telegu linguistic community migrating to Pune comprised of various castes, more particularly the service providing and artisan castes. Among the south Indians in Pune, Telegu speakers are predominant at all stages of Migration. The padmasalis among the Telegu community in Pune are the most numerous in comparison to all other immigrant communities from Andhra Pradesh (Ibid., 50). They have formed ethnic settlement in Ganjipeth, Bhavanipeth, Nanapeth areas of Pune, where they constitute 75% of the residents and subsequently their ethnic associations to preserve social & cultural identity (Ibid., 49).

Residential differentiation based on ethnicity has been a feature of Indian cities from precolonial times. With the surge of modernity, the relative importance of ethnicity & socioeconomic status as the basis of residential clustering has changed (Shaw, 2012:102-103). But despite this modern changeover, there is persistence of residential concentration along ethno linguistic lines in the Indian cities. Whereas a third or more generation immigrants have lost their original languages or native customs they have recreated their cultural diversity in distinct ways (Chaudhury, 2015:294).

“Matunga in Mumbai became a veritable bastion of south Indian migrants and Udupi Restaurants with Ramnayaks, Cafe’ Madras & several others established in the 1930’s & 40’s.” (Tumbe, 2018:47)

Matunga locality of Bombay has been nicknamed ‘Little Madras’ denoting a small cultural world of the Tamil Brahman immigrants in Bombay (Michael, 1988:196). Though there are several Tamil Brahman residences in various parts of Bombay, Matunga occupies the central position in providing cultural leadership for the Tamil Brahmins in Bombay. This illustrates a form of ethnic behaviour in which internal migrants simulate their regional cultures in their adopted urban area (Narayanan, 1989:14). Similarly, the immigrant Gujratis in Chennai established their ethnic enclave named Sowcarpet in the central business district. They have exhibited a
tendency to cluster in this area in large numbers in contrast to the Tamil merchant community who chose to move out of this area (Ibid., 31). The Gujaratis of Madras whether affluent or not display their ethnicity in urban society.

In the Indian cities the immigrants from diverse linguistic backgrounds tend to cluster together, counter the process of de-ethnicization in urban milieu instead of leading to de-ethnicization and possesses numerous attributes which are conducive for the strengthening of ethnic identities. Urban population anywhere in the world is composed by differentiated group of people displaying such diversities revealing the futility of such concepts such as the city as a melting pot. A city is a heterogeneous social space comprising racial, linguistic, ethnic minorities, migrant workers, refugees, the affluent, the indigent, exhibiting contrasting life styles (Gill, 2009:243-244). In terms of ecological structuring cities are affected by socio-cultural factors.

Even in an urban setting various ethnic groups which are immigrant to the city maintain their internal coherence leading to the entrenchment of their ethnic identities. Urban sociologists in India like K.L. Mythily (1974), Punekar (1974), K.S. Nair (1978), Susan Lewandowski (1980), M.S. Gore (1970), exploring immigration into the cities reveal that migrants belonging to particular regions, languages religious affiliations, castes & tribes tend to cluster together in certain delineable areas of the city (Michael, 1989:24). It is migration which produces ethnicity something one finds in a place where one is culturally different (Flanagan, 1990 & Gill, 2009:243). Ethnicity emerges & endures because people find it a useful or meaningful category of membership. Cities define metropolitan practices & cultures with city space acting as the node where multiple identities & modernities emerge & contested (Patel & Deb, 2006:34). It is a part of colonial urbanism that immigration to the Indian colonial cities have been promoted by history of caste networks (Ibid., 21). In analysing the sociological aspects of immigration to the cities in India reference comparison can be made to David L. Hoffman’s view which reveals that for the periods before & after collectivization demonstrate that preexisting village networks & migration traditions continued to guide migrants to Moscow in the 1930s. Before the revolution & two decades after it, almost all peasants who settled in Moscow came from European Russia (Hoffman, 1994:55-56). During this period virtually no peasants from Transcaucasia, central Asia or Siberia settled in Moscow. Therefore the exodus of migrants followed a regionalist pattern in Soviet Russia. What is pertinent here is that throughout the world, migrant peasants & rural communities have been taken part in massive urban migration.

Indian Scholars like A. Bopegamage (1956), Mary Chatterjee (1971), AnandInbanathan (1988), K.S. Nair (1978), V.B. Punekar (1974), T.K. Majumdar (1983), K.C. Zachariah (1966), S.M. Michael (1989) have examined migrants to the Indian cities. The processes of migration to Indian metropolis from various linguistic & cultural regions have affected the urban milieu in terms of heterogeneity & complexity. Though various cultural groups in the city undergo integration of various cultural ethos, different linguistic immigrant communities recreate their own respective cultural worlds (Michael, 1989:32). A significant dimension of Indian urbanization process is the transformation of immigrant regional communities in Indian cities into permanent dwellers of the city, their urban adaptation, residential segregation. Modern empirical studies reveal that in the urban setting forces of ethnic identity accentuation (re-ethnicizing tendencies) coexist along with forces of acculturation (de-ethnicizing tendencies). According to Jay A. Weinstein (1974), an urban sociologist, ecological structure of Madras reflect both modern & traditional elements in its residence pattern (Rao et al, 1990:92). In his study of Calcutta, anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose (1965) reveals that migrants belonging to the same region & cultural background cluster together in certain specific areas of the city. They are distinguished from one another not only by language & culture but also by broad difference in the way they make their living (Rao, 1990 & Michael, 1989). Even recent studies of Indian cities & ethnic groups like the one by Rajesh Gill (2009) reveal the relevance of ethnicity in terms of persistence of residential segregation even in the most modern industrial cities.

“In Bombay for instance it is a common practice for a complete block of flats to be occupied by a single ethnic group e.g. Gujaratis, Parsis, Punjabis or Chistians (either Catholics or Protestants).” (Gill, 2009:242)
Scholars of urban sociology have asserted that ethnic boundaries or multiple identities have not blurred in the urban setting falsifying the notion of de-ethnicization. The migrant communities form their regional ethnic association to preserve regional identity, in this way, ethnicity is reinforced among the urban migrants. According to Susan Lewandowski migrants in Madras city established different societies & associations based on discrete caste lines (Lewandowski, 1980 & Rao, 1990:282). Lewandowski argues although there were separatist feelings among those living in Malabar, Cochin & Travancore, the Madras Malayalee could form an organization overriding caste religious & local regional differences & it was on this basis that the Kerala Samaj in Chennai came into being (Rao et al, 1990:286). The Malayalees of Madras city in order to halt linguistic erosion among Malayalee children born in Madras have conducted Malayalam night classes in the lower middle class neighbourhoods of Triplicane, Tondiarpet, Georgetown, Parktown & Perumbur in Madras city 1950s (Ibid., 291). The migrants associations by Keralities in Madras city have fostered a sense of pride in the ethnic & linguistic heritage of the Malabar Coast (Ibid., 298). Different case studies regarding the heterogenous nature of urban population even in the shantytowns of Indian metropolises reveal the persistence of cultural consciousness. For instance, Owen M. Lynch in his study of shantinagar slum in Bombay reveals that the poor slum dwellers do not exist as aggregate category or homogenous category. He points out that Shantytowns of Shantinagar is cosmopolitan displaying polyphony of languages. The potters of Shantinagar identify themselves as Gujratis and as Prajapati Kumbhars who are culturally different from south Indian & Muslim slum dwellers (Lynch, 1979 & Rao et al 1990). As such despite similar socioeconomic status of the slum dwellers their ethnic identity is seldom homogenised. It may be pointed out that where as diversity of urban migrants make the modern cities cosmopolitan facilitating acculturation among ethnics, there is no symptom of end of ethnicities, but conversion of ethnic identities into rivalries.

On account of migrant status & persistence of ethnic consciousness, there is an ever widening social distance between urbanities. The segregation of racial & ethnic minority groups into distinctive quarters in towns is not a new phenomenon. In present day cities segregation is unlikely to be as extreme but will probably be most evident in cities where fundamental ethno-cultural differences exist (Sen, 2011:92). The large metropolitan cities display residential segregation as they have traditionally attracted residents with high cultural & social diversity (Rao et al, 1990).

It is linguistic dispersal to the large cities which leads to residential segregation based on race or ethnicity. In analysing the theme of urban migration the ethnicity of the migrants, the process of their adaptation is very crucial. The theory of sub-culturalism propounded by Claude S. Fischer asserts that urban society is characterised by critical mass or communities with similar values & beliefs & practices (Gill, 2009:239). Ethnic identities do not disappear but persist in large cities which provide the urban milieu. Subcultures thrive with various ethnic groups preserving their outlooks & lifestyles, maintaining internal coherence at the same time they can get into friction or clash with each other under certain conditions. This perspective provides a synthesis of compositional & determinist approaches. It is not that only the tradition-bound societies of the East witness the persistence of ethnicities as minorities & nationalities in the west have fought on ethnic lines (Ghosh, 2003:221-243).

In a pluralistic society with myriad particularisms like India communities have been hermetic groups of language based on ascriptive ties. Contestation & conflict over multiple primordialities have gone on unabated in post independent India. Linguistic or ethnically heterogenous societies are marked by various faultlines among which language is very significant. It is this language which is important in the Indian conception of culture, region & community well before the modern age but ethnolinguistic nationalisms in India are a modern phenomenon. Differentiated social history of regions, assymetrical development coupled with the catalytic role played by regional elites have generated & consolidated nativistic or parochial movements in India. The issue of migration gains salience in that it make the local ethnic community conscious of their own ethnic cohesion and nurture nativism. Ethnic identity has been one of the major determinant factor in the paradoxical process of nation building in India.
Indian Transnational Diaspora

The issue of Indian overseas diaspora involves ethnicity, divided allegiance in the hostland (Devarajoo, 2009). Overseas or transnational migration from India which predates colonial period has witnessed a history of transformation from indentured labour migration, mercantile migration to skilled migration in recent times. Indian migrant communities went abroad to the Caribbean, England, U.S.A., South East Asia and Oceania to form Indian diasporic community are not merely diasporic after a few generations in the hostland (Ibid.,). Though ethnic behaviour of overseas Indians are at variance from one country to another depending on the attitudes & policies of the host society, a section of the overseas Indians are now a part of communities with complex, distinctly hybridized national identifications (Roberts, 2009:211).

What is significant with regard to ethnicity of the Indians in foreignland is the diversity of their Indian territorial origin. Indians in Europe on the basis of their linguistic & cultural background have created their Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati & Telegu Diasporas (Gautam, 2013). It is the process of segregation, integration & assimilation witnessed by the ethnic Indians abroad which affects their process of deethnicization, hybridization & rethnicization. On the migrants’ side it is the duration of stay abroad (Single generation or intergenerational) and host society’s side it is the nature of neighbourhoods in western cities which shape the ethnic behaviour of Diasporic communities. With regard to salience of ethnic boundaries, neighbourhoods in western cities act as specific sites of immigrant integration and exclusion (BodyGendrot & Martiniello, 2000). It is evident that Indian communities who have settled overseas exhibit their otherness. There are several cultural practices followed by Indian Diaspora which are expressive of Indianness and their ethnic roots. For instance, carrying kirpans, wearing turbans, smearing vermillion are practiced by Indian Sikh & Hindu communities who have settled in USA or Great Britain. It has been found that Asian Indian immigrants settled in U.S metropolitan cities for decade subscribe to Indian television programming as a means of ethnic gratification. Their yearning to get a feel of Indian culture was fulfilled through digital media and electronic media (Somani & Ging, 2008).

There have been several phases in the lifeline of Indian diaspora’s ethnicity in the U.S.A., Europe or its colonies (British Guyana, Surinam, Caribbean, Mauritius). Ethnic Indians overseas have faced segregation, integration and assimilation vis-a-vis their host society. It has been found that immigrant Indians or their second and third generations not only forge a new hybrid identity but also strive to revive their ethnic roots.

Conclusion

Diasporic communities are a creation of migration within national borders and outside. When social groups and communities traverse borders, question of ethnocultural exclusion and inclusion are set in motion. The Indian ethnic communities both within India and abroad have gone through different phases of ethnic relations with the host society. Differences in ethnicities have led to isolation and social distrust between the immigrants and the hosts. At the same time accommodation and integration of immigrant communities have been witnessed with blurring of ethnic boundaries. Given the modern context of globalization and flux, resurgence of ethnicities among the migrant communities who are on an unending search for original roots, is a reality which cannot be overlooked.
References


